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**The SELWYN HOUSE
Senior Players**

Present

**THE
GOVERNMENT INSPECTOR**

By Nikolai Gogol

Directed by Alex Ivanovic

April 29 & 30, May 1

8:00 P.M.

**95, Côte St-Antoine
Westmount, Qc**

About the Play

Nikolai Gogol
(1809-52)

Many Russian writers of the nineteenth century are known for their prose - Tolstoy, Turgenev, Pisemsky, Saltikov-Shchedrin - also wrote for the stage. Nikolai Gogol, one of the finest comic authors of world literature, and perhaps one of its most accomplished nonsense writers, pursued a career more like that of Chekhov. He was not a full-time novelist making an occasional foray into another medium, bringing along the esthetic imperatives of his major concerns. As a pupil he acted and directed plays from the classical repertoire and was, without exception, considered a great comic actor and a superb reader - the theater became an absorbing interest. He thought himself both a dramatist and a writer of prose fiction, bringing to each a creative lightning for which he is revered. His plays were as innovative as his fiction, and have proved as durable.

A common metaphor for Gogol's career has been that of a comet, bursting on the scene, burning itself out quickly, but transforming the configuration of Russian literary culture. His essential literary corpus was conceived, written or begun in an eight year period (1829-36) and produced only three finished plays, relatively little prose fiction, a score of short stories and an incomplete novel. Gogol is best known for his short stories, for his play *Revisor* (1836; *The Government Inspector*, or *The Inspector General*) and for *Myortnye dushi* (1842; *Dead Souls*), a prose narrative that is never the less subtitled a "poem." *Nos* (1836; *The Nose*), a parable on the failure of all explanatory systems, relates an utterly inexplicable incident and the attempts to come to terms with it. Both *Shinel* (1842; *The Overcoat*), which is probably the most influential Russian short story, and *Zapiski sumasshedshego* (1835; *The Diary of a Madman*) mix pathos and mockery in an amazing display. As in *Nevsky prospekt* (1835; *Nevsky Avenue*) and *Povest o tom, kak possorilsya Ivan Ivanovich s Ivanom Nikiforovichem* (1835; *The Tale of How Ivan Ivanovich Quarreled with Ivan Nikiforovich*), language itself seems to generate its own absurd content while the universe turns out to be a counterfeit of which there is no original. Characteristic of Gogol is a sense of boundless superfluity that is soon revealed as utter emptiness and a rich comedy that suddenly turns into metaphysical horror. The government Inspector develops a sequence of (witting and unwitting) confidence games within confidence games in a corrupt world of endless self-deception. The mock-epic, even mock-satire, *Dead Souls*, simultaneously allegorizes the timeless bureaucratic tendency to make official documentation more genuine than actual existence, the emptiness of the human soul, and the mind's absurd ways of grasping meaning or value. It is one of the most striking (and most Gogolian) ironies of Russian literary history that radical critics celebrated Gogol as a realist.

Although much of his writing resulted from bursts of inspiration, Gogol was also a meticulous craftsman, advising writers to dash off their projects hastily, even carelessly, and then go back to them at periodical intervals (ideally eight times!), and his manuscripts attest numerous revisions. The plays underwent more extensive reworking than any of his short stories.

On October 7, 1835, Gogol implored Pushkin to send him “an authentically Russian anecdote” upon which he would, he promised, knock off a comedy “funnier than hell.” in less than two months perhaps Russia’s greatest play and one of the great comedies of the world’s repertoire was completed. Studies of the original manuscripts of *The Government Inspector* have led scholars to believe that it was written in several days of feverish activity. Less than a year later, the play opened at the Imperial Dramatic Theater in St. Petersburg on May 1, 1836, bewildering the fashionable audience. Was this a farce? Was this a satire on provincial manners? Was it a libel on certain individuals? Because the play depicted the endemic corruption and incompetence of Russian officialdom, it surprised one and all when it was passed by the theatrical censor. Rumor had it, Nicholas I, who had little confidence in his subordinates, consented in order to have the opportunity to watch them squirm. The Tsar’s presence at opening night brought out the important dignitaries of state and the beau monde of the capital, who were scandalized by what they took as an affront to good taste (it was called a dirty play!) and a slander on Holy Russia. The reaction in Moscow was similar, leading someone to ask the actor Shchepkin, who played the mayor, what else he expected when half the audience was on the take and the other half was greasing palms. For those disaffected by the status quo, the work crystallized everything they hated about Russia (“contemporary Russia’s terrible confession,” Herzen called it) and they claimed Gogol as their own. However, Gogol’s age was one of burgeoning criticism of society from a conservative as well as radical position, and in time it became clear that he was closer to the nostalgic Slavophiles than the forward looking westerners. It is difficult to say what disturbed the soon-to-be apologist of patriarchal Russia more: the censure of the right or the embraces of the left. The hypersensitive Gogol was in despair. He complained that the production had perverted his intentions and, on June 6, 1836, in the midst of the uproar, he scurried away from Russia to spend most of the next twelve years in exile, much of it in his beloved Rome. During those many years, he revised the comedy, composed instructions for the actors, wrote dramatic sketches to explain its meaning and eventually insisted it was a morality play, its characters representing Human Vices and the Inspector, the Conscience. But by this time he was hopelessly at odds with his creative impulses. One of the world’s greatest comic writers yearned to be an edifying preacher. In his later life Gogol came under the influence of a fanatical priest, Father Konstantinovskii, and burned sequels for *Dead Souls*, just 10 days before he died on the verge of madness on March 4, 1852. His career wound up as a black comedy in its own right.

Cast

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| The Judge | Alexis Asselin |
| Waiter | Alex Black |
| Mishka | Chris Bryson |
| Bobchinsky | Matt Busbridge |
| Korobkin | Henry Buszard |
| Director of Charities | Sam Carsley |
| Superintendent of Schools | James Govan |
| Khlestakov | Jacob Harris |
| Storekeeper | Philip Hospod |
| Postmaster | Ned Maloney |
| Osip | Theo McLauchlin |
| Cop | Christian Meguerditch |
| Doctor Hübner | Philipp Menzel |
| Storekeeper | Danny Naami |
| Lyulyukov | Philip Oliver |

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| Cop | Chris Politis |
| Dobchinsky | Gurinder Samrai |
| Rastakovsky | Alex San Gregorio |
| The Mayor | Daniel Wilner |
| The Homeless Man | Eitan Yane |
| Corporal's Widow | Elizabeth Campbell (<i>The Study</i>) |
| Locksmith's Wife | Hannah Eichenwald (<i>Trafalgar</i>) |
| Superintendent's Wife | Kate Fletcher (<i>The Study</i>) |
| Anna Andreyevna-Mayor's Wife | Kaitlyn Riordan (<i>The Study</i>) |
| Korobkin's Wife | Sara Schlemn (<i>The Study</i>) |
| Marya Antononovna-Mayor's Daughter | Vanessa Tobin (<i>F.A.C.E.</i>) |
| Musical Director | James Darling |
| Musicians: | |
| Clarinet | Thomas Evans |
| Guitar | Tim Dobby |
| Keyboard & Programming | David Knecht |
| Percussion | Max Knecht |

Production Crew

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| <i>Director</i> | Alex Ivanovici |
| <i>Set Design</i> | Robin Paterson |
| <i>Lighting Design</i> | Robin Paterson |
| <i>Costume Design</i> | Heidi Van Regan |
| <i>Assistant Director & Stage Manager</i> | Dave Cameron |
| <i>Stage & Technical Crew</i> | Robin Paterson David Cameron Keith Woods Alex Ivanovici Gaspar Brabant Philip Oliver Henry Buszard Jonas Bouchard |
| <i>Lighting Board Operator</i> | Roberto Gomez |
| <i>Make-up</i> | Virginia Ferguson Emily Beckerleg, Lis Clemens, Lisa Gardhouse, Elizabeth Maloney, Najwa Sallman, Pina Salusbury, Maria Tratt, Mary Ellen Viau, Lorayne Winn |
| <i>Programme, Ticket & Poster Design, and Photography</i> | Maria Tratt |
| <i>Artwork for Poster & Tickets</i> | Sam Carsley |
| <i>Tickets & House Management</i> | Brenda Montgomery |

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Maria Tratt
Jaime McMillan
Mary Ellen Viau
Virginia Ferguson & her make-up team
Rob Wearing
Trafalgar School
Kathy Biggs
Matilde Codina
Sue-Anne Pham
Brenda Montgomery
James Darling
Keith Woods
Gaspar Brabant
Jonas Bouchard
Jossette MacNamara
Sylvie Bastien-Doss
Marsha Warmuth
Eliot Smith
Leah Vineberg
Carol Manning
Face Theatre Department

Director's Notes

NO USE BLAMING THE MIRROR IF YOUR FACE IS CROOKED - *A Proverb*

Like most great plays, Nikolai Gogol's *The Government Inspector*, a nineteenth century Russian masterpiece, still resonates in Canada on the eve of a new millennium. One need not look very far these days to find examples of the social ills it portrays: deep corruption, shallow self-interest and blind materialism. It has been a great challenge for The Selwyn House Senior Players to identify these elements honestly within their own contemporary reality in order to bring life to an imaginary Russian village. Gogol's play presents us with a context which we can casually dismiss as ancient history. Its feudal community is easily disguised as the social and political antithesis of our scrupulous modern democracies. Such a masked vision, however, tends to obscure the human mirror we use to navigate between the present and the past.

The mirror of which I speak is art in all its forms: theatre, literature, music, visual arts, dance, and today a host of electronic media that bombard us with images of ourselves. Artists in all these different fields are faced with the same question: 'how can I re-direct my lens in order to bounce reality's beam?' In the twentieth century, this question is perennially on our minds as ever-more-efficient cameras, tape recorders and computer chips run after our lives. The anxiety of keeping up appearances inside today's boundless frames can prevent us from noticing the violence of our pace. Do we take the time to recognize ourselves during the daily human race?

Putting on a play about the past is not merely an attempt to keep it forever relevant to the present. Theatre's temporal transpositions provide performers and audiences alike with a rare opportunity for perspective. In the case of *The Government Inspector*, we may consider this potentially suffocating moral ultimatum from a distance: If we do not face art's imaginary problems and call them our own, our children may inherit our masks instead of our wisdom.

If this sounds a little dark for an introduction to a comedy it's because, as Gogol puts it:

"We have turned the theater into a plaything, something like a rattle used to entice children, forgetting that it is a rostrum (a platform for public speaking) from which a living lesson is spoken to an entire multitude, a place where, in the presence of festive brilliant lighting, thundering music and general laughter, secret vice shows its face and elevated emotions, timidly hidden from view, make themselves known before hushed murmurs of common sympathy."

The Selwyn House Senior Players, Robin Paterson, Heidi Van Regan, James Darling and I would like to welcome you into the mad world of Gogol's nineteenth century provincial Russia. Lay down your masks as we do our best to fill the fun house mirror with truth, laughter, surprises and fear.

Wishing you an enjoyable evening,
Alex Ivanovici

